

SEIU Holds Heated Debate Over the Sleeping Ban

August 2005

by Becky Johnson

Five years ago, the Santa Cruz City Council struggled with ending the sleeping ban that criminalizes sleep for homeless people, but they fell short of that goal. Instead of ending the sleeping ban, they settled for lower fines and fewer hours of community service required for hapless sleepers caught catching forty winks within the city limits.

Since then, City officials have acted to prevent the unhoused from residing in vehicles or even parking them, whether they were sleeping in them or not, in vast swaths of the city. Arrests under the sleeping ban are markedly up from just a few years ago, and there is nary a councilmember who is moved to do anything about it.

Yet a small group of determined activists are pushing forward in their efforts to end the ban, driven not by a groundswell of support, nor by political expediency, but just by a gut feeling that as long as homeless people can't sleep at night, no one else can truly rest.

When Human Rights Organization (HRO) member Bernard Klitzner approached Tim Ahern of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), he found they were in sync on this issue.

Ahern is part of a struggle by In-Home Health Care workers with a union that is satisfied with negotiating less than a living wage which leaves the threat of homelessness looming for SEIU homecare workers. Once homeless, even if still employed, SEIU workers fall victim to the sleeping ban.



"Homeless Family. Hard Times. Anything Helps." Hard times for homeless families in Santa Cruz.

Robert Norse photo

"There is a law that makes sleeping illegal. There is a law that makes covering up against the elements at night illegal. This smacks of the old South, racism and a community in denial about the human rights violations going on to a certain class of people."